



**What Anglers  
and Boaters  
Should Know  
About Commercial  
Fishing Trap Nets**



*The pot-end of the net is marked with a single flag buoy.*

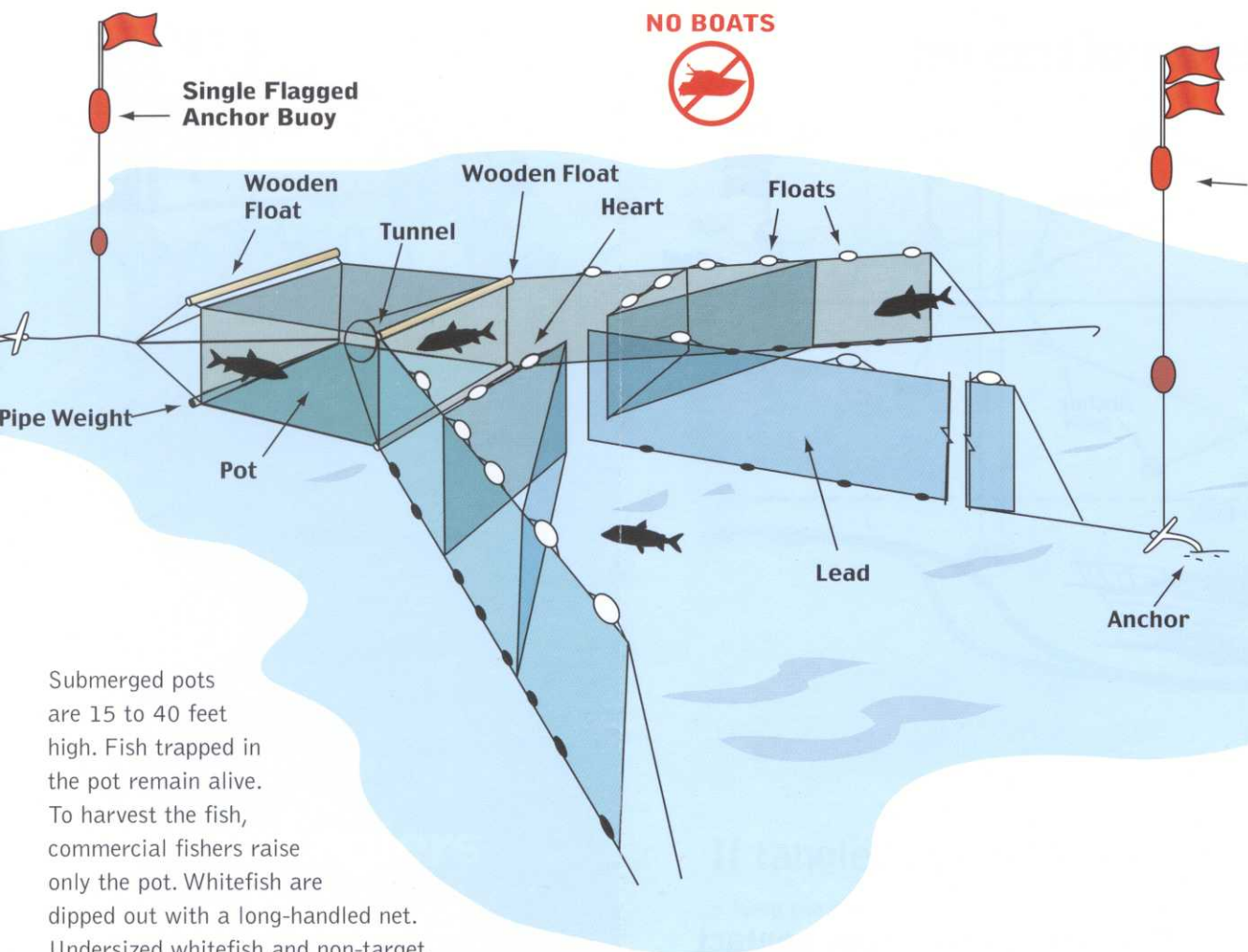


## What are trap nets?

Trap nets are large, commercial fishing nets used by state licensed and tribal commercial fishers to catch whitefish in the Great Lakes. Trap nets are increasingly being used in the Wisconsin waters of Lakes Michigan and Superior. With many components, these stationary nets can pose a potential risk to recreational boaters and anglers. The following facts will help anglers and boaters recognize and avoid trap nets on the open water. **Sport trolling is NOT advisable near or above trap nets.**

## How do trap nets work?

Trap nets sit on the bottom of the lake. They have long leads, or sections of net, made up of thick 14-inch mesh that can be as long as 1,250 feet. These leads are visible to schooling whitefish and divert the fish into an enclosure called the heart. The heart has wings or net sections that form a V-shape and are supported by floats and anchors. Once inside the heart, fish swim through a tunnel and become trapped in a box-shaped pot.



Submerged pots are 15 to 40 feet high. Fish trapped in the pot remain alive. To harvest the fish, commercial fishers raise only the pot. Whitefish are dipped out with a long-handled net. Undersized whitefish and non-target species are returned to the water unharmed.

Bottom net placement and fish behavior of many species enables the trap net to be selective for whitefish. These nets seldom trap sport fish, such as salmon and trout. As a result, state and tribal management authorities prefer to see this type of gear in waters where sport and commercial fisheries overlap.

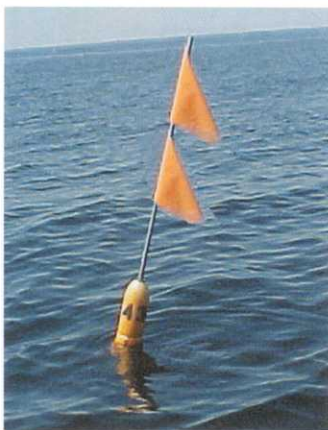
Trap nets are typically fished in water up to 150 feet deep. Leads on shallow-water trap nets are generally set in water 15 feet deep or less and may extend to the surface. For deep-water trap nets, leads may be 45 feet high.

Once set, repositioning a trap net is a complicated process because the nets are anchored in place for extended periods of time—sometimes an entire season. On a typical fishing ground, trap nets are fished shallower in the fall and spring than in summer.

## How to identify trap nets:

- Trap nets are generally fished perpendicular to the shoreline (from shallow to deep water). A double flag marks the lead, or shoreward end, of the net and a single flag marks the pot, or lakeward end, of the net.

## Double Flagged Anchor Buoy



*The lead-end of the net is marked with a double flag buoy.*

**Be aware!** During rough water or heavy currents, these flags may tip down or be obscured by high waves.

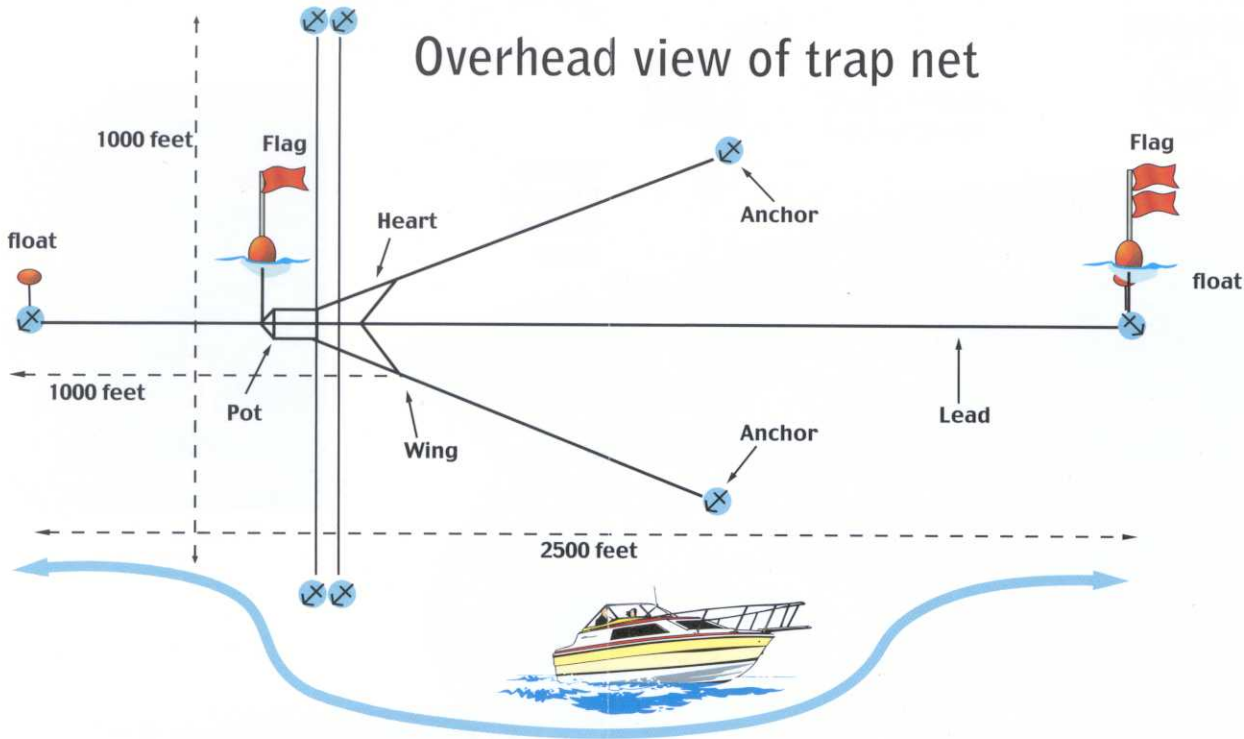
- Orange flags attached to a staff buoy at the pot must be at least four feet above the surface of the water. Flags will be approximately 12 by 9 inches.
- Orange buoys may also mark the ends of the wings.

## How to avoid trap nets:

- Look for the flag markers and buoys marking the nets.
- Give wide berth when passing trap net buoys and flag markers, as nets have many anchor lines extending in all directions.
- Do not pass or troll between trap net buoys, as propeller blades and/or fishing gear may easily snag net lines.



# Overhead view of trap net



## If tangled in a trap net:

- Keep the bow of the boat facing into the waves.
- Shut off engine if prop becomes tangled.
- Snagged downrigger cables can be dangerous—release any tension on cables and cut.
- Do not enter water to untangle nets.
- If you need assistance, radio the U.S. Coast Guard.

If you've lost fishing gear, contact the commercial fisher. If possible, identify down-rigger balls with your name and phone number so they can return your equipment.

For more information, contact  
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